

# The Permissiveness of Crowds

By Carl Nelson

As a boy grows he finds that he is attracted to the military. He likes their rigor, their camaraderie, valor, and fighting ability. When he is old enough, he enlists. Another boy in the enemy country feels and does the same. One fights on the side of a political system diametrically opposed to the other. This isn't of much concern to them. Patriotism and love of homeland are sometimes used like spackle to cover intellectual cracks and holes.

Sebastian Junger in his book, *Tribe / On Homecoming and Belonging*, notes that often persons (males predominantly) will go to war as an effort to test themselves; that this was an ordeal passed through on the way to manhood. In his words, this seemed the predominant reason the author found for embedding himself as a correspondent to conflicts around the globe.

But there are a variety of reasons for enlistment.

Also, "...voluntary service has resulted in a military population that has a disproportionate number of young people with a history of sexual abuse. One theory for this holds that military service is an easy way for young people to get out of their home..." (Pg. 84)

And many enlist from a long family tradition of military service.

But what many miss upon returning to civilian life – even after horrific combat experiences – is the close bonding and sense of purpose they had felt within their military unit – something which they no longer found in the civilian community. "As awkward as it is to say, part of the trauma of war seems to be giving it up. For the first time in our lives...

we were in a tribal sort of situation where we could help each other without fear. There were fifteen men to a gun. You had fifteen guys who for the first time in their lives were not living in a competitive society." (Pg. 91-92) This sort of tribal bond allowed an intimacy melded to purpose not easily found in civilian society.

Interestingly, Junger notes that whereas during the birth of our country there were hundreds of instances of colonists running off to live with the Indians, there were none of the reverse. Junger believes that for all of its material benefits, modern civilization is sorely lacking in the necessary life experiences and cultural cement found in tribal cultures.

I can't say I've much felt any of this.

Nevertheless, why do I read articles by those with the same persuasions as myself? Certainly I know their arguments and am much more familiar with their perspectives than many others. Couldn't more insight be gained by spending more of my time reading the opinions of others I am in disagreement with? This is certainly what those I disagree with are telling me all of the time.



But in all honesty, I am constantly peppered with the views of

these 'others' throughout the news, culture, media and even in commerce (Budweiser, et al). If I cling to my own crowd, it's more in terms of running for shelter! ("from the storm") When I do listen to these 'others', what I hear are such repetitive talking points, as if they were woodpeckers beating on my head. Each time they trot out their little intellectual 'gotcha', it's as if it's their next messiah. Perhaps theirs, but not mine. The poor little thing has been prostituted around the culture and sold in bulk offers more often than macaroons.

And I can't say that I read more hospitable authors for reasons of tribal affiliation. Conservatives tend to be rather prickly. Banter and handshakes are more what we do. While liberals do hugging, and seem to love voicing their concerns through the megaphone of crowds.

But I'll state here quite freely, that I don't listen to the opinions of everyone. First, there simply isn't time. And second, not everyone is worth listening to. Many make no sense, that is, they babble on and on without a takeaway. Some I've known to fabricate and lie. Others are stating the obvious. Some are always singing from the chorus. Others simply have their facts mixed up, or are unaware that there are such things. But most are repetitive as drops of rain, (water torture?), and one (as I've said) must run for shelter.

Why do I think something? Why do I believe something? We like to think that the thoughts that pop into our heads are our own. It's a natural assumption. But my feelings change depending upon those of the persons around me, and oftentimes so does my thinking.

Perhaps this is because I'm being open-minded and reacting to other opinions. However, my thinking and feelings about something – such as my own work – can rise and fall, turn left or right – based on what I'm hearing, what others say, all the while the work itself hasn't changed a whit. And memories of



this shape my succeeding utterances. In other words, I don't believe we are autonomous and independent as we believe ourselves to be. It is not that easy to rebel. This is why people tend to do it in large crowds where it's safest.

People like to imagine they are quite independently minded. But the truly independently minded tend to be loners who leave the crowd to sequester themselves somewhere away from the mass. Writers often do this. James Joyce lived in Italy and Paris among different languages even, where he wrote about Ireland (in English). Writers leaving home to seek their fortunes elsewhere is "almost a cliché", as they say. If writers and/or artists are to say anything different from the accepted cant, it is very hard to do so when nobody thereabouts wants to hear it, they object to it, or are saying just the opposite day in and day out. As propagandists know, even if something is an indisputable lie, when repeated enough, even those who know it to be a lie will begin to parrot it, or at the least accept its dominance.

It would seem that in order to think what we think, we must also find others who think as much also. That within each crowd resides a permissiveness of certain thoughts and behaviors. So that the intellectual life is a high wire act of both independently seeking and visualizing the truth while also seeking the crowd which will allow you to react honestly. So that a large portion of finding what you seek in life is also a matter of finding the right crowd – that the two are conjoined. The right people around you will allow you to see further and to express further. The wrong people will apply the blinders.

Different crowds will tolerate different thoughts and behaviors, and the permissiveness of crowds can be a great draw. Some crowds are largely defined by their intellectual profile, while others are most defined by fingerprints of their permissions – rather like the protocols and behaviors of the symphonic matinee crowd will differ from that of a heavy

metal concert or a Grateful Dead appearance though all claim to love music.

The enticement for dissimulation can be extreme. For example, those who claim intellectually to be for the downtrodden, can at the same time greatly enjoy the crime and violence of burning up their neighborhoods, local businesses and committing violence against whoever opposes. For example, isn't it often the case that whatever something is named, the actions undertaken on its behalf are often quite the opposite? For example, Whispering Grove might be a development named for the trees it displaced, or we might find the Bubbling Brook Estates' brook burbles through a culvert presently. Witness the East German Communist totalitarian Russian satellite named the "German Democratic Republic". In my estimation people often tacitly join groups for the cultural emblem and cachet, but more crudely for the permissive activities. It was never hard to talk youth of my day into a hippie outlook when you were offering easy sex, drugs and an absent work ethic.

Thinking can be hard. Arguing can be work. Explaining oneself over and over gets tedious. A crowd is like a flag you might wrap yourself in which effortlessly explains so much while you gain the permissions of citizenship. It could be an American flag, a Rainbow flag, BLM or Antifa banners, which all grant certain permissions. Walk down the middle of the freeway by yourself and you'll likely be arrested. Walk down the freeway within a group of thousands, waving their banners, and the mayor might come out to greet you.

You might be able to speak out against the crowd once or twice, but it's quite hard to live there. To build our lives we need a supportive (or at the least, tolerant) community. So when I decide who I listen to and whom I reject it is because I am collecting the materials I need to construct my life – and not necessarily because I am insulating myself in ignorance. Not to bathe oneself repeatedly in lies, deceptions, propaganda and utopian fantasy is more a matter of

good hygiene. To eat proper food, to speak clearly and honestly, to honor reality and to preach the benefits of doing so while assembling what truths we can from our experience and those of others is a time honored method of building a good life and a healthy community. Watching the food you eat, the people you surround yourself with, and the ideas you entertain is a matter of prudence. To neglect this is to believe we can "beat the Devil".

As in wartimes, even those soldiers who enlisted in the fight for God and Country, end up in the trenches primarily fighting to protect the lives of their buddies nearby. And they gather the community around them who will allow them to build such fellowship. That is, they join with like minded people in order to get into a situation where this sort of grace might serendipitously find them. So that at the same time they are fighting a war, they are struggling to build and to be a contributing part of a sought community. At the more feminine end of this spectrum, I'd suppose, would be the adventure of Woodstock.

As a poet my belief is that we uncover the mysteriousness of life through the plainest of clarity – just as the physical laws of the Universe when pursued relentlessly are found to be floating on a quantum sea of interconnected isolates. For this reason I subscribe to journals especially where clarity is fostered. And I like words used so that they figuratively glow with specificity and insight like fireflies. So I subscribe to literature where thoughts are described most specifically and bon mots graze. And I like the thoughts to be tied to tangibles, so that much of reality intrudes. Most of my vehicles must be parked tied to posts, and we move slowly. The fastest we move might be at a lope. In truth, I do like cowboys. This is the crowd I seek. My conservatism stretches clear back to the Big Bang – that voice heard across the waters.

For Progressives who use rationality, and scientific discovery

to guide them towards Betham's utilitarian utopia – I would say let reality truly guide your imagination. **Don't let the followers of Betham's imagination confine your vision.** Allow some intellectual diversity into your friendships. Don't misuse the permissiveness of crowds to cancel. For indeed, “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” – Hamlet